----CONSERVATION DISTRICTS OF IOWA (CDI) ----

CONNECTIONS

The Conservation Districts of Iowa (CDI) informs, educates, and leads Iowans through our local soil and water conservation districts to promote conservation of natural resources.

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From: CDI President Ramona Nitz

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank those commissioners/districts who filled out and returned the Annual Conference surveys. It's always interesting to see that the same events can be seen very differently from one person to the next. We will continue to go over them closely to see what your thoughts are and adjust accordingly.

We did find that many of you feel that winter would make a much better time to hold the conference. You say that things are less hectic then and it's so much easier to get away. With that in mind, I'm really looking forward to this next "Partnership Day" that is scheduled for January 11. I'm hoping for a very good turnout!

For those of you who don't regularly attend Partnership Day, let me fill you in. The CDI Board meets first thing in the morning and any of you are welcome to attend. After that meeting adjourns, we head to the Wallace Building auditorium to hear from our lobbyist and get the talking points for this year's visits. When everyone feels prepared to speak with their legislators, we head over to the beautiful Capitol and do just that. I've always really enjoyed my time at Partnership Day and can't imagine missing it! I drive back home knowing that I've tried to do my part to influence conservation funding.

So, please mark January 11 on your calendars and prepare to make a difference as you meet with your respective legislators to discuss funding the very important work we do. I've been told that our showing up makes a big difference. I look forward to seeing you then.

-- Ramona

Executive Director Report – John Whitaker

With one year left in the Five-Year Soil and Water Resource Conservation Planning process, we are looking at what we can do to continue the good work the Commissioners and Planners have completed. As the name implies, the planning process is designed to be completed every five years. Ensuring that this process happens is an important part of the Iowa Nonpoint Source (NPS) Management Plan which Iowa DNR submits annually to the US EPA. The NPS measures progress on water quality improvement and your local plans are a critical local link to ensuring that everyone works together to improve Iowa's water quality.

We were unable to fill the two open Wetland Easement Team Specialist positions with our interviews in early October. We did have good candidates and made offers but both individuals we offered to accepted competing positions. We are readvertising the positions so if you know of anyone who is qualified, please let us know.

One of the USDA Climate-Smart Commodities grant applications that we partnered in was successful. Our part in this agreement is very small but important. We will be seeking individual farmers who fit the USDA definition of "Historically Underserved" to offer their participation in the project. The project will study using native prairie grasses and other feedstocks to create sustainable bio-gas energy. More to be announced on the project soon.

USDA-NRCS announces new website launch

Message to Conservation Partners from Jason Johnson
State Public Affairs Specialist
USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service
jason.r.johnson@usda.gov

A new NRCS website launches in October, designed to support and enhance NRCS' mission to deliver relevant, timely, customer-focused information in an easy-to-navigate platform. The new site is organized around the customer, whether we're talking about farmers or our partners. This includes better navigation that makes it easy for agricultural producers to get help and to learn more about our programs and services.

Other highlights:

- It's **accessible** (or **508 conformant)**, meaning the site is designed for use by people with disabilities.
- It's **responsive**, meaning that it should work on a phone or tablet as easily as on a desktop computer.
- It's been designed using the **US Web Design System**, so you'll see a certain "family resemblance" among USDA and other federal websites.
- The site will be **leaner**, meaning we're evaluating and getting rid of out-of-date content.

The new website has a new URL or address. You can access it at either www.nrcs.usda.gov/IA or www.nrcs.usda.gov/Iowa. Our old website homepage will redirect to our new site. **However, webpages within our old site will be broken if attempted to be accessed through an old bookmark or if linked in a document or other website**.

If you have any questions or have difficulty finding what you're looking for on our new website, *please let me* or Public Affairs Specialist Jolene Bopp know, and we would be glad to help you out.

Real Conservation or CO^2 Pipelines?

A Commissioner's Perspective on Alternative Public Investments

Neil Hamilton
Dallas County SWCD Commissioner

Many county boards of supervisors have passed resolutions opposing the proposed CO2 pipeline projects being promoted in Iowa. Regardless of whether you favor or oppose them – or are still neutral – one issue is beyond dispute***: the pipelines will do nothing to improve Iowa's land or make long-term investments in soil health, conservation, or water quality.*** The land related damages they cause make them just the opposite, one reason why SWCD commissions should consider opposing them too. There are real opportunity costs to Iowa if we use public "climate" investments for pipelines rather than use public funds to protect land and water, build stronger communities, create local employment, and improve Iowa's agricultural system.

Iowans need to seize this opportunity to develop alternatives because unfortunately, the discussion has been one-sided. Promoters present the pipelines as a great benefit to Iowa's economy, to create the impression they are a fait accompli. A strong cast of political operatives, relatives, investors, and others are lined up hoping to get rich – estimates of future public tax benefits exceed $10 billion - but this does not mean the pipelines aren't first class boondoggles, crony capitalism Iowa style. Rather than use such huge "climate" subsidies for pipelines, imagine if instead we invested in conservation, soil health, and water quality. Consider what Iowans could obtain for $1 billion over 10 years, a fraction of the proposed pipeline costs:

1. **Local soil conservation capacity** - $100K per year so each Soil and Water Conservation District can employ a conservationist and support local projects. Ten-year cost = $100 million
2. **Promoting local watershed projects** - Hire 50 watershed coordinators to develop HUC 12 watershed projects. Ten-year cost [$60K x 50 x 10] = $30 million
3. **Create wetlands to improve water quality and wildlife habitat** – Construct 50 wetlands per year at $100K each. Ten-year cost = $50 million
4. **Increase cover crops** – Provide incentives to landowners, $25 per acre for 100,000 acres/ year. Ten-year cost = $25 million
5. **Leverage private sector efforts to reward better farming** - Expand Iowa Soybean Ag Outcomes project, $20 million per year. Ten-year cost = $200 million
6. **Convert Marginal Land to Grass** – Support Practical Farmers of Iowa retiring non-productive cropland, $6 million per year. Ten-year cost = $60 million
7. **Pay Landowners to protect buffers on rivers and streams -** Acquire conservation easements retiring 60,000 acres farmed in 2-year flood plain, $5000@ acre. Ten-year cost = $300 million
8. **Improve Manure Handling** - Demonstrate improved manure handling, digitize land records for manure plans, $3 million a year. Ten-year cost = $30 million
9. **Support county water quality projects** – Fund saturated buffers and local projects, $100K per county a year. Ten-year cost = $100 million
10. **Administration, record keeping, and monitoring outcomes** – Fund state and local agencies, $10 million a year. Ten-year cost = $100 million

Total costs of this ambitious 10 element initiative over 10 years: $995 million.

Impacts for Iowa would include:	What would Iowa gain:	What would Iowa avoid:
• 200 + full time conservation jobs • 400 + full time private sector jobs • 500 new wetlands covering 5,000 acres • One million acres of cover crops • 60,000 acres of stream buffers, using conservation easements on private land retired from cropping in 2-year floodplain, • 10,000 new saturated buffers and local water quality projects • 100,000 acres restored to grass, prairie, and wildlife habitat	• Improved soil health; Reduced soil erosion; Improved water quality; Increased wildlife and pollinator habitat; Reduced nutrient loss from cropland; Increased carbon sequestration; Hundreds of local jobs; Projects in every county; and all based on voluntary agreements with thousands of farmers and landowners.	• Using eminent domain to take private land over owner's objections • Disrupting thousands of private drainage systems • Compacting hundreds of miles of subsoil • Misusing public funds for private profits • Attempting to pick winners and losers in future energy use debates

If Iowa had leaders willing to support enlightened public policy, proposals like this are possible.
If enough SWCD commissions raise our voices, it could happen.

Unique collaboration between West Pott SWCD, East Pott SWCD and County Supervisors

Education Coordinator shares passion for conservation with next generation

Need a glimpse of the Iowa's sustainability future? Look in the hands of preschoolers spreading bird seed among a growth of trees … listen as 2nd graders learn the flight paths of migrating Monarch butterflies … or visit an after-school club of youth hearing how soil comes to be the giver of life. The future is *now*, with the young people of Pottawattamie County, under the guidance of Laura Monson. As Education Coordinator for both West and East Pott SWCDs, Laura's conservation education programs set the foundation in young minds to care for the earth they'll inherit.

Laura Monson
West/East Pott Education Coordinator

"Education is one of the most important and effective ways for us to get the message of conservation and land stewardship out there," Laura says. "Kids are absolutely loving it, and it's so important because they're learning about conservation and agriculture, and our hope is that they'll grow up and be good stewards of the land themselves. But a lot of the things we're teaching is rubbing off on their parents, as well. Kids go home and talk to their parents about what they learned about conservation that day, and hopefully their parents might start at-home conservation projects or investigate things they could do on their farm."

(Photos courtesy East Pott SWCD)

According to East Pott SWCD Chair Kami Willett, this Education Coordinator position is the result of a unique collaboration between the **West Pott SWCD**, **East Pott SWCD**, and the Pottawattamie County **Board of Supervisors**. "The district has had educators in some capacity starting with a Resource Conservation Planner since the 80's," says Willett. Recognizing the positive impact this position has had over the years, Willett says that East Pottawattamie SWCD, West Pottawattamie SWCD and the Pottawattamie County Board of Supervisors established a 28E Sharing Agreement to assist in providing this position an employee benefits package utilizing the Local Options Sale Tax (LOST) funds already allocated for conservation support in the county.

"With this newly established Sharing Agreement, we were excited to have Laura join us in May of 2022," says Willett, adding that the fulltime Education Coordinator position is unique among Iowa districts. "The impact this program has had for the students and citizens of our county is amazing! We would be happy to discuss our program with anyone that is interested in starting an Education program in their District."

A brief overview of coordinator activities would include Farm Safety Days, Earth Day Projects, Summer Camps, in-school curriculum, afterschool programs, Women Landowners meetings, watershed education – among much more. Laura Monson is a Waterloo native and Iowa State University graduate with a B.S. in environmental science and minor in sustainability. "So far in my position I've taught in multiple schools throughout the county reaching hundreds of kids," Laura says. For Laura, the value of introducing young people to the ideals of water and soil conservation should be a priority for every Iowa SWCD. "Land stewardship and conservation is the main goal and mission of all conservation districts. Doing outreach, doing events, getting our name out there, and getting our presence out there to the community is so important. It's become my greatest passion in life to teach people and kids about conservation and the environment. I see the environment as the base of our world – and the health of our world is the base for the health of everything."

Iowa Learning Farms Webinars

Staff and commissioners are encouraged to join these valuable weekly webinars, offering insights and updates on issues, updates, and how-to techniques of importance to committed conservation-minded Iowans. Participate in the live events, check out archived webinars from weeks past, and read a blog synopsis of up-coming sessions.

November ILF Webinar Schedule

11/2: Jason Palmer and Claire Hruby, Iowa Department of Natural Resources
11/9: John McMaine, South Dakota State University
11/16: Sarah Noggle, Ohio State University
11/23: Jaqueline Comito, Iowa Learning Farms
11/30: Lauren Salvato, Upper Mississippi River Basin Association

Join live: LINK **View archives: LINK** **Read future session blog: LINK**

IAWA 5th Annual Watershed Awards Program, including Conservation Districts of Iowa as a co-sponsor

Hunter Slifka, Watershed Coordinator of 2022 (Photo courtesy IAWA)

Hunter Slifka recognized as 2022 Iowa Watershed Coordinator of the Year

Hunter Slifka, watershed project coordinator for the Turkey River Headwaters & Chihak Creek in NE Iowa, was honored as the 2022 Watershed Coordinator of the Year by the Iowa Agriculture Water Alliance (IAWA) during the fifth annual Iowa Watershed Awards program. In addition to his award, he received $5,000 for the Turkey River Watershed and $1,000 for career development. Slifka said of the award, "It is definitely quite the honor! It shows the hard work and dedication of the farmers and landowners in Howard County is paying off!"

With Slifka's dedication to water quality in his 62,000-acre watershed, cover crops have expanded from only 1,500 acres five years ago to 17,000 acres this past fall. This has a direct impact on water quality for his community and communities downstream. His work is also improving trout streams that feed into the Turkey River. "Hunter has demonstrated dedication and commitment to his community through his work and his volunteer efforts. His collaboration with farmers, landowners, government agencies, and nonprofits is really making a difference," said Sean McMahon, Executive Director of IAWA. "That's the type of coordination we need to continue to see to improve water quality and successfully implement the Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy." The IAWA Iowa Watershed Awards program was developed by IAWA in partnership with Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, Conservation Districts of Iowa, The Iowa Department of Agriculture, and the Iowa Department of Natural Resources.

Additional 2022 winners include Ruth McCabe honored with the Private Sector Impact Award, and Tracy Peterson honored with the Public Sector Impact Award. Slifka is proud of nearly exponential growth of cover crops planted in the 62,000-acre watershed where he has been the coordinator since 2018. Now cover crop acres represent more than a fourth of the watershed's land area. Five years ago, it was only 2%. The practice protects soil from erosion until spring and keeps nutrients in place that otherwise could impair streams. This translates to long-term soil health benefits.

Slifka works with 432 farmers and landowners in the watershed who have installed more than $5.6 million worth of best management practices, including cover crops planted each fall, grassed waterways, and nine wetlands with five more planned. What he calls a "bandwagon effect" now protects nearly half of the watershed. State and federal government funds aren't the only support for the project. It also has thirteen partners, including Trout Unlimited, the Iowa Coldwater Conservancy, the Izaak Walton League, and Turkey River Pheasants Forever.

This article is reprinted with permission from the Iowa Agriculture Water Alliance. Read the complete story here.

The 4R's of Regenerative Ag: right fertilizer, right rate, right time, right place

by Kriss Nelson, ISA

Regenerative Ag practices can transform our currently used cropping systems and bring new value to Iowa farmers, improve soil and water quality, and add climate resiliency enabling farmers to deal with changing weather. Such practices include focusing on no-till/strip tillage, crop rotations, cover cropping and integration of livestock grazing as well as using precision ag and data analytics to optimize yields and profits. The ISA RCFI is working at the nexus of helping farmers research and test these practices and support conservation implementation. We are partnering with ag retail and conservation districts across Iowa to bring these pieces together.

Accurate placement of nutrients not only brings an economic benefit but an environmental one as well. To help achieve the goal of providing the plant with the food when it needs it, producers should look to the 4R Nutrient Stewardship program. "The 4Rs are important from not only an agronomic perspective, but also soil health and water quality," says Evan Brehm, Iowa Soybean Association (ISA) conservation agronomist. The 4R concept incorporates the right fertilizer source at the right rate, time and place. Brehm says being mindful of the nutrient sources used for fertilizer and using split applications of nitrogen work toward 4R stewardship efforts. Also tissue sampling or sap analysis tests help optimize crop health and nutrient management. "We can use in-season field imagery to help us locate areas that may need more nutrients than others, so we are putting those nutrients in the right place," Brehm says.

Regenerative agriculture

One practice to consider in achieving the 4RNutrient Stewardship goals is regenerative agriculture – a continual system involving agriculture and nature working simultaneously. "We want to work with nature, not against it," says Brehm. "We view soil as a living, breathing system. It is a continuous process as we feed the soil microbes they feed our plants, which in turn produces the crops we want."

Nutrient sources

Regenerative agriculture also includes regenerative nutrient sources, Brehm says. "It is a holistic system in the soil where the plants start to mine and find nutrients, such as phosphorus in our soil," Brehm says. "With rising input costs, we want to make the most of fertilizers and products we have, and using regenerative principles allows for us to do so."

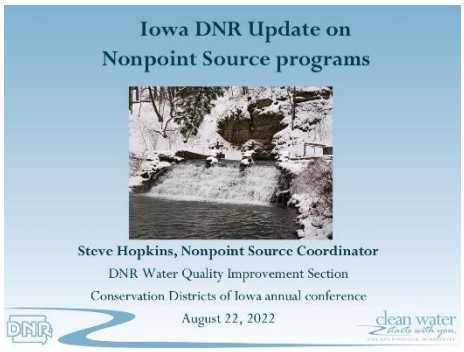
Mike Bretz of North Liberty started the journey toward regenerative agriculture three years ago. "I was inspired to reduce input costs while improving soil, water and air quality as well as enhancing the nutrient content of our crops," says Bretz. Bretz Farms is practicing 100% no-till. They grow 120 acres of non-GMO corn; 120 acres of soybeans; 120 acres of oats, wheat or rye; and 80 acres of pasture and hay with a multi-species cover crop between the rotations. They also have a 60-head cow/calf herd in a grass-fed operation. As in nature, soil biology converts nutrients and minerals into usable forms for the crops to uptake. When making nutrient input decisions, Bretz says he relies on results from a spring Haney soil test – a test determining what quantity of soil nutrients are available to soil microbes.

Bretz says he has not applied potassium or phosphorus for the last three years. Regarding nitrogen application in his corn, he side-dressed 60 pounds of nitrogen per acre this year. His soybeans are fed from nutrients in the soil and don't receive synthetic fertilizer. Rather than purchasing nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium or other synthetic fertilizers, Bretz prefers to use cover crops, including rye, hairy vetch and daikon radish. The radish, for example, grows deep into the soil, breaking up compaction. Rye develops a vast root mass and helps to tie up nitrogen, making the nutrient available to crops in the spring. Together, these cover crops help improve the soil so worms can do their job and help with water infiltration. "We are minimizing inputs as much as we can," he says. "We have used some organic nutrients, such as emulsified fish fertilizer, which adds a little nitrogen and is not harmful to the biology in the soil. Nature wants to do the work for us."

This article was provided by the Iowa Soybean Association's Research Center for Farming Innovation (RCFI). Click here to read the complete article. Our mission is to engage Iowa farmers through research and innovation to increase their productivity, profitability, and sustainability. For more information on the Iowa Soybean Association's Research for Farming Innovation, visit our website www.iasoybeans.com/Research or contact Kristen Dearden, kdearden@iasoybeans.com.
Iowa Soybean Association is a valued sponsor of CDI.

CDI 2022 Annual Conference Presentations

The following presentations from the August 2022 CDI Annual Conference are available for download. We thank our presenters! Links also available here for sharing: CDI Conference Presentations.



DNR Presentation, Stephen Hopkins

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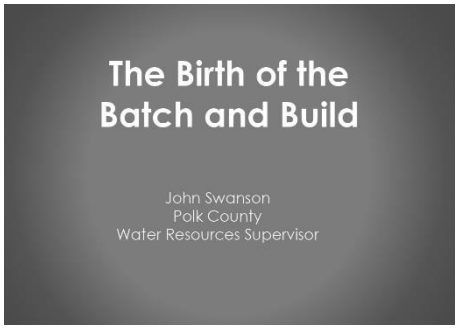

The Birth of Batch and Build, Johnathon Swanson

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Improving Water Quality, Catherine DeLong

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Meetings, meals … and a few memories made!

Another look back – CDI 2022 Annual Conference

Thanks to all who joined together in August for our CDI Annual Conference! Business was conducted, resolutions were debated, awards were given, speeches were delivered … and we still had time for fun! See you next year!

(Photos courtesy IDALS, Dennis Carney, Mike Henning)